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Reis, Elisa P.; Morales Silva, Graziella

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# Processes and national dilemmas: The Interplay of Old and New Repertoires of Social Identity and Inclusion\*

Procesos y dilemas nacionales: la interacción  
entre viejos y nuevos repertorios de identidad  
social e inclusión

*Processos e dilemas nacionais: A interação entre velhos e  
novos repertórios de identidade social e inclusão*

**Elisa P. Reis\*\***

**Graziella Moraes Silva\*\*\***

Universidade Federal de Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

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- \*\* Ph.D Political Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge. Professor of Political Sociology at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and chair of the Research Network on Social Inequality (NIED) based on the same institution.  
E-mail: [epreis1@gmail.com](mailto:epreis1@gmail.com).
- \*\*\* Ph.D. Sociology, Harvard University. Professor of Sociology at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and associated to the Research Network on Social Inequality (NIED) based on the same institution. Graziella is a recipient of research grants from CNPq and FAPERJ.  
E-mail: [grazi.moraes.silva@gmail.com](mailto:grazi.moraes.silva@gmail.com)

## Abstract

In this article, we explore the impact of the global cultural transformation that reconciles the values of equality and difference as parameters of the good life. We argue that the idea that social justice incorporates both the value of equality and the value of difference expresses a broad cultural transformation, one that poses new challenges society has to confront to deal with the social distribution issue. Moreover, we sustain that while this challenge is present everywhere, responses to it vary not only as a matter of policy choice, but also as consequences of the fact that possibilities are circumscribed by the particular trajectories of nation and state building. While there are forces at play today that make us aware of fallacious conflations between nation and state, it remains relevant to look at national contexts as meaningful frameworks in order to understand what is going on and to explore possible alternatives to deal with emerging issues. Moreover, looking at ways people in different historical settings experience global transformations is relevant, not only to illuminate policy choices to deal with them, but also to enrich our theoretical understanding of the changes at play. The adoption of a historical sociological approach contributes to illuminate particular national trajectories without losing sight of possible commonalities that make it possible to contribute to the effort to reach general explanations.

Taking into account the above, we focus on the way Brazilians perceive both equality and difference and comment on the uncertain consequences of the interplay of old and new repertoires of social identity and inclusion. In particular, we look at the ethno-racial aspect, the most salient issue in the current debate about difference. Empirically, we analyze perceptions of inequality and difference among different segments of the Brazilian population. We confer special attention to two issues: the relationship between race and national identification and support to affirmative action, the most traditional policy to take into account particular identities while distributing social resources. First, we find that in Brazil racial and national identification do not seem to be in conflict. Second, we find that most Brazilians approve racially-targeted affirmative action with no significant difference according to racial identification but with significant differences according to socio-economic differentiations.

**Keywords:** Brazil, Difference, Historical processes, Inequality, Nation Building, Nation-States, Race.

## Resumen

El artículo tiene como telón de fondo el proceso global de transformación cultural que introduce el concepto según el cual tanto la igualdad como la diferencia son componentes legítimos de la idea de “buena-vida”. El argumento central del artículo destaca que, a medida que el ideal de justicia contemporáneo incorpora estos dos valores (igualdad y diferencia), permite una transformación cultural de gran alcance, al punto de que esta reubica bajo nuevos parámetros la cuestión de la distribución social de bienes y valores. El trabajo plantea también que, si bien ese reto de la reconfiguración de la idea de justicia convoca a toda la sociedad en su amplitud, la variabilidad de las respuestas no se limita a una cuestión de elección entre alternativas de política pública. Más bien, las opciones disponibles resultan ser determinadas también por las trayectorias particulares de construcción de los Estados y de las naciones.

Si bien hoy en día somos testigos de la fuerza que nos reitera lo falaz de todo atajo conceptual que favorezca la confusión entre las nociones de Estado y nación, la mirada a los contextos nacionales permite mantener un lente privilegiado para la comprensión del cambio y la exploración de alternativas para enfrentar temas y asuntos emergentes. Más aún, la perspectiva que analiza la forma en que diferentes grupos humanos experimentan la transformación global, según los diferentes contextos históricos, no solo aclara las opciones de política pública, sino que enriquece nuestra comprensión de esas mismas transformaciones. De igual forma, el artículo sustenta que la adopción de una perspectiva analítica histórico-sociológica permite la comprensión de las trayectorias nacionales particulares sin dejar de enfocarse en los posibles elementos comunes que deriven en la búsqueda de explicaciones generales.

Se discuten las percepciones de los brasileiros acerca de la igualdad y la diferencia y se analizan las consecuencias inciertas de la interacción entre viejos y nuevos repertorios de identidad e inclusión social. Para ello, la discusión privilegia el aspecto etno-racial, que es el que más se destaca en el debate actual. Empíricamente, el análisis se enfoca en las percepciones acerca de la igualdad y la diferencia entre distintos segmentos de la población brasileña. Dos cuestiones merecen atención especial: la interfase de las identidades etno-raciales y nacionales en el país y el apoyo otorgado a las acciones afirmativas, —la opción tradicional para desarrollar políticas incluyentes frente a identidades específicas—, mientras al mismo tiempo se lleva a cabo una redistribución de recursos sociales. En primer lugar, estos análisis no señalan la existencia de conflictos significativos en la forma como los brasileiros concilian sus identidades raciales y nacionales. En segundo lugar, en cuanto a las políticas de acción afirmativa, no hemos encontrado diferencias significativas en las opiniones de aquellos que se identifican como negros o blancos, pero encontramos diferencias entre los distintos grupos socioeconómicos.

Palabras clave: Brasil, construcción nacional, desigualdad, diferencia, estados nacionales, procesos históricos, raza.

## Resumo

O artigo tem como pano de fundo o processo global de transformação cultural que introduz a ideia segundo a qual igualdade e diferença são ambas componentes legítimas de um ideal normativo esposado pela sociedade. Salienta que, na medida em que o ideal de justiça contemporâneo incorpora esses dois valores (igualdade e diferença), assistimos a uma mudança significativa no plano cultural, e que esta coloca em novos termos a questão da distribuição social de bens e valores. Argumenta também que, embora esse novo desafio se coloque para toda a sociedade, a variabilidade das respostas a ele não se limita a uma questão de escolha entre alternativas de *policy*. As opções disponíveis são também circunscritas pelas trajetórias particulares de construção dos estados nacionais. Se, por um lado, observamos processos históricos que mais e mais desnaturalizam a fusão entre estado e nação, permanece crucial levar em conta os contextos nacionais tanto para entender as mudanças em processo como para melhor identificar as alternativas de ação que se apresentam em diferentes contextos. Os autores sustentam também que a adoção de uma perspectiva analítica histórico-sociológica contribuiu para iluminar trajetórias nacionais particulares, sem perder de vista as possíveis comunicações que permitem contribuir com a busca de explicações gerais.

O artigo discute as percepções dos brasileiros sobre a igualdade e a diferença enfatizando que permanecem incertas as consequências da interação entre velhos e novos repertórios de identidade e inclusão social. Para tanto, a discussão privilegia o aspecto etnoracial, que é o que mais se destaca no debate atual. Empiricamente, a análise se volta para as percepções sobre igualdade e diferença entre distintos segmentos da população brasileira. Duas questões merecem atenção especial: a interface das identidades etnoraciais e nacionais no país e atitudes relativas à política de ações afirmativas, a opção mais tradicional para se contemplar identidades particulares na distribuição de recursos sociais. Nossas análises não encontraram conflitos significativos na forma como brasileiros conciliam suas identidades raciais e nacionais. Com relação às políticas de ação afirmativa, não encontramos diferenças significativas nas opiniões daqueles que se identificam como negros ou brancos, mas encontramos diferenças entre os distintos grupos socioeconômicos.

Palavras-chave: Brasil, construção nacional, desigualdade, diferença, estados nacionais, processos históricos, raça.

## Introduction

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In recent decades, the acceleration of several global processes has posed growing challenges to national states. Many even sustain that the nation-state itself is vanishing under the impact of forces that contribute to erosion of its stateness, and/or to strengthening of social identities at the expense of nationhood. In their view, the historical construct that merged authority and solidarity is quickly losing its objective and subjective grounds, posing, therefore, the need for new institutional arrangements to ensure societal coordination.

Indeed, it is impossible to ignore that, today, the old nation-state model confronts unprecedented challenges that bring into question its old established pillars. Yet, there are no signs that we may already dispense with it to confront the very problems that seem to make it into an anachronism. Suffice to look at the historical constitution of actual nation- states to realize that, while conforming to a common model, they have experienced unique combinations of past developments and actual choices. Following the same reasoning, it follows that the common processes affecting national states all over the world have different implications and require diversified responses as well. Thus, it seems crucial to incorporate a historical perspective when discussing the actual implications of global transformations.

While it is true that there are forces at play that make us aware of the fallacious conflation of society and national states, it remains relevant to look at national contexts as meaningful frames in order to understand what is going on, and to explore possible policy alternatives to deal with emerging issues. Moreover, looking at ways people in different historical settings experience global transformations is relevant, not only to illuminate policy choices to deal with them, but also to enrich our theoretical understanding of the social changes at play. If we take into account, for example, one particular contemporary phenomenon, that of the growing demand for the recognition of differences that we observe all over the world, two general observations follow. First, the need to reconcile demands for equality and for difference recognition is a global challenge. The idea that social justice incorporates both equality and difference expresses a cultural change that is gaining momentum and has global consequences. Second, despite this challenge in common, local responses are multiple and must take into account typical trajectories of nation and state building.

If difference joins equality as a key demand of democracy, mature democracies and new ones face significantly different challenges. For example, in old established democracies, immigration and minorities pose the major challenges. To preserve the democratic ideal of citizenship, they confront the problem of incorporating new partners who claim citizenship together with the recognition of their particular cultural identity, often in conflict with native working classes. In turn, for many of the democracies-in-the-making, the problems of incorporation involve people who are not newcomers, sometimes not even minorities, but who do not have full access to citizenship rights. In such contexts, demands for difference recognition

are much more entangled with class demands for equality - often allied to the demands of lower classes and so-called old social movements. Looking at these two typical situations, we can anticipate that they count on significant variations in the resources and limitations to cope with demands for inclusion and recognition. While in both cases identity recognition is a salient issue, the place of nationhood and the role of class cleavages are certainly something that set them apart.

Taking into account the above, the general objective of our research project is to better understand how nation-states are negotiating the contemporary and global dilemma of guaranteeing the equality of all citizens with the recognition of ethno-racial differences. First we elaborate this question theoretically and then we analyze the Brazilian case, historically and through survey results. Thus we combine two methodological perspectives: we adopt a macro-historical approach to better understand how Brazil has historically dealt with the ethno-racial diversity of its population, and we explore recent national surveys to analyze how these historical narratives are currently perceived and challenged by Brazilians. For details on the national surveys see footnote 5.

Looking at the particular case of Brazil, we explore what has been the impact of the global cultural transformation that reconciles the values of equality and difference as parameters of the good life there<sup>1</sup>. Focusing on the way Brazilians perceive both equality and difference, we comment on the uncertain consequences of the interplay of old and new repertoires of social identity and inclusion. In particular, we look at the ethno-racial<sup>2</sup> aspect, the most salient issue on the current debate about difference. In the following pages, we first present our theoretical assumptions about the role of difference in the contemporary world. Then, in section II, we proceed to systematize the historical processes through which equality and difference have been negotiated in nation-state building, and the contemporary dilemmas of the re-emergence of difference as a key category for citizenship. Section III briefly presents the Brazilian historical negotiation of equality and difference, with a particular focus on the origins and development of racial differences, to contextualize the contemporary debate over difference

1. Our analysis is based on the Research Program we develop in the context of the Interdisciplinary Research Network on Inequality, at the Graduate Program on Sociology and Anthropology of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (NIED/PPGSA/UFRJ).
2. We are aware that by joining ethnicity and race in the same concept we are underplaying important social, political and academic genealogies of these two concepts. Nevertheless, we believe that both, ethnicity and race, play similarly important social and political roles in the reproduction and transformation of inequality. In addition, ethnicity, largely perceived as cultural, is commonly embodied in perceived phenotypical differences while race, since the discredited of biological racism theories, has been largely translated as a cultural category. To compare ethno-racial categories it is essential to understand that these categories do not begin or end within nation-state boundaries.

and inequality. In section IV, we turn to empirical evidence on perceptions of inequality and difference among different segments of the Brazilian population. In particular, we focus on two issues. First, we discuss the interface of ethno-racial and national identifications in the country. Second, we explore perceptions about inequality and difference and their relationship, with special emphasis on attitudes towards affirmative action —the most traditional policy to take into account difference while distributing social resources— among distinct socioeconomic and racial groups.

We observe that Brazilians do not seem to understand the interface of racial and national identification as dilemmatic. In addition, while socioeconomic exclusion and racial prejudice are acknowledged by all groups, the use of racial identification as a tool for redistribution is strongly opposed by the elites and by those with higher education in general, but accepted by most Brazilians who seem to perceive racial differences as a legitimate criterion for social redistribution. Yet, when asked to rank their preferences, regardless of social position and educational background, Brazilians seem to prefer universal criteria to targeted or particular ones. In other words, equality and difference are not perceived by the majority as contradictory or exclusionary, but most seem to establish a hierarchy between these two criteria, placing equality on top. The complementarities of policies of status and recognition in Brazil may allow the emergence of a novel model aiming at society-building, which may successfully replace the historical model behind the building of nation-states. The fact that this remains an open question only adds importance to research on the subject.

### Conceptual Caveats

While discussing the growing importance of discourses of recognition and difference in the political and global realms, it is critical to elucidate how we understand these concepts in order to avoid essentialist or reductionist definitions and assumptions.

First, we believe that religion, gender, ethnic and racial differences have long played a role in nation-building processes and exchanges. The key transformation that has taken place in the past few decades is the way these diverse identities are perceived and acknowledged as legitimate in the public and political debates. As we discuss next, despite the long history of ethnic conflicts in most countries, the debates between universal and multicultural national identities are relatively recent. Such a change is a result of global and local transformations (Featherstone, Lash, and Robertson, 1995).

Second, although diverse identities have always played a role in nation-building, ethno-racial and religious differences are not essential ones. They are social constructs created through the definition of salient boundaries between us and them (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Wimmer, 2005). Which boundaries are salient and which are erased is a matter of socioeconomic, cultural and institutional dynamics, and not a consequence of intrinsic meanings.



Third, the salience of boundaries involves both structural and cultural processes, which can be transformed not only in the long run, but also through the recent global and transnational exchanges. As we will discuss in the case of Brazilian blacks, although the socioeconomic differences between blacks and whites is a constant in Brazilian history, especially due to that of slavery, the salience of black identities has varied according to the political environment and to the cultural repertoire available for collective action (Sansone, 2003).

Fourth, the construction of difference in the public space usually involves a double process of categorization and identification, as defined by Jenkins (1997). Categorization refers to processes of stigmatization, discrimination, and prejudice in which difference is imposed. Identification refers to processes of collective mobilization through cultural or social action in which difference is chosen.

Finally, and this is one of our key arguments, equality and difference interact in multiple ways through distinctive historical processes. Therefore, the policy solutions to create a balance between equality and difference might involve the erasure of boundaries, the strengthening of subordinate identities, or even the shifting of focus to hegemonic / majority, and usually invisible, identities, as discussed by Nancy Fraser (2000). The fact that the relationships between equality and difference do not fit a single pattern makes it worth looking at human agency, at perceptions, and at subjective experiences as relevant analytical dimensions. Next, we provide a brief overview of the distinctive ways equality and difference have been constructed in modern nation building strategies.

### **The Interface of Equality, Inequality and Difference: Historical Approaches and Persisting Dilemmas**

Nation-states are generally understood as comprising: 1) a defined territory, 2) a set of distinct institutions and laws, and 3) a shared culture and history that together form a national polity (Calhoun, 1993). While the universal definition of a nation-state stresses the sovereignty and universal rights of national subjects, a moral definition emphasizes its shared values and cultures. The debates about the origins of nation-states are endless, and it is not our goal to summarize them here—for a sociological approach to this issue, see Rokkan (1969), Eisenstadt and Rokkan (1973)—. Our intention here is to identify distinct approaches that have been used to identify—either theoretically or normatively—the re-emergence of difference as a central political issue.

#### **Downplaying Difference and Constructing Equality in the Old and New Worlds**

In pre-modern societies, taken-for-granted differences were the basis for social hierarchies, and equality was not an issue. Equality as a national ideology emerged through the downplay of differences (ethnic, language, religious, cast) and through the emphasis on communalities based on belonging to the same territory and obeying the same authority (Elias, 1982).

Such equality was the basis for the emergence of the notion of universal citizenship (Bendix, 1964).

Universal citizenship is generally understood as the ensemble of civil, political, and social rights and duties attributed to the members of a national polity (Marshall, 1950). Despite differences across countries, modern European nation-states were created on the basis of this universal principle, i.e. rights were guaranteed on a universal basis to all members of the polity rather than relying on particular religious, language, or family-based traits. Universal rights were defined as the basis for equality, and equality was defined in opposition to inequality of treatment. Difference was generally underplayed as an issue except when it represented a threat to the unity of the nation-states (e.g. challenging the authority); it was deliberately repressed.

Throughout the 20th century, the modern model of nation-state was “exported” to the new world. In these countries, artificial borders were often drawn, cutting across ethnic communities. Moreover, the successive inflow of European migrants, and in many cases, a history of massive slavery made the notion of a shared history and culture throughout a sovereign territory almost inconceivable. Yet, elites in each of these new nations—with different degrees of success—invested in forging the creation of national identities with “imagined” components of a shared national culture, usually in opposition to colonial powers (Anderson, 1983). Unlike European nations, which had at least a common territory and history as a basis to invent traditions, in the new world, traditions had to be invented from scratch. In many cases the strategy was to draw together various elements of the different cultures and ethnic groups, creating the new national identity as a melting pot - even if in practice that usually meant assimilation into the mainstream elite local culture.

The term melting pot is usually used with the North American experience in mind. There, melting pot was to include Europeans coming from different countries, within a common community of Americans. In Latin America, the idea of melting pot was translated into ideas of racial democracy in Brazil as well as the concepts of *raza cósmica* in Mexico, *criollismo* in Peru (Wade, 1993; Wade, 1997). They all refer to this desire of having a nation-state that includes all groups equally, usually eroding the particular racial and ethnic identities that existed inside national borders.

For our discussion, it is important to stress the differences between the construction of citizenship through universal equality and melting pot models. In particular, we want to point to the different definitions of equality and their relation to inequality and difference in these two models. Within a universal equality framework, equality is opposed to inequality of opportunities (even if inequality of outcomes might still be taken for granted) and difference is underplayed as an issue. In the melting pot approach, equality is opposed to difference (of race, ethnic or religious identification) and inequality is underplayed, and even taken for granted through hierarchical images of societies, a strategy usually followed in Latin

American countries. These two models, however, in stressing equality, coincide, rejecting political organization around ethno-racial identities, and defining the nation-state as ethno-racially neutral (Kymlicka and Norman, 2000). The re-emergence of difference as a key political category brought strong criticisms to these assumptions, defined as assimilationist in their practice, i.e. subordinate and minority groups are expected to be assimilated into the dominant culture, in order to be part of the nation.

### **The Re-emergence of Difference: Multiculturalism and its Dilemmas**

In recent decades, tensions between equality and difference have gained importance. In Europe, the substantial decline in inequality and the growth of international immigration have brought difference to the forefront. European nations have been forced to deal with new types of differences, which had often been seen as incompatible with their national cultural and values.

In North America, it is possible to identify signs of the salience of difference much earlier. Identified as a land of opportunity, the continent attracted a large influx of immigrants since colonial times. In part due to their early independence and autonomy from their colonizers, the United States and Canada rapidly moved from a model of melting pot to one of universal citizenship - allowing greater rights to all groups, and growing freedom of speech, faith, and association. The United States, in particular, was early defined as a model of equality and democracy (Tocqueville and Reeve, 1835). Yet, it is in this society that the tensions between equality and difference first emerged. Because in both definitions of equality—as a melting pot and as universal equality—blacks were systematically excluded, the black civil rights movement and, later on, the black power movements, brought the issue of difference to the forefront.

It was particularly after the end of WWII that the consolidation of the geopolitical hegemony of the US occurred, and, after the renewed intensification of global flows, that the multicultural model emerged as an alternative to universal citizenship, and it became increasingly popular. From the 1960s onwards, especially in Europe and North America, multiculturalism has been defined in multiple ways, but one of its core elements is to argue that the recognition of difference is an important source of inequality. Therefore, it is essential to guarantee that all ethno-racial groups in each society have the right to organize around their identities to demand citizenship rights—not only in relation to redistribution (equality)—, but also recognition (the right to difference). In other words, the **multicultural** model adds a fourth element to Marshall's three levels of citizenship (civil, political, and social): cultural citizenship (Ong, 1996).

Yet, to stress difference did not necessarily solve the tensions between equality and difference or between difference and inequality. In our view, three central dilemmas have characterized current debates about multiculturalism. First, difference might undermine the basis of national solidarity.

Such a dilemma stresses a direct relationship between the strengthening of ethno-racial, religious, or language identities and the weakening of national identities. In Europe, such a dilemma commonly assumes a distinction between old differences versus new differences (the ethnic, religious, and cultural differences of new immigrants and ethnic groups). In recent years the multicultural model has been accused of being the flip side of assimilation, artificially separating ethno-racial groups, “sleep-walking into segregation” and reinforcing ethno-racial stereotypes with artificial recognitions policies. Second, difference may be a threat to universalism, and therefore to equality itself. Critics of multicultural policies argue that they violate individual rights by implementing measures that undermine meritocracy. Here, universal rights are defined as the only way to guarantee equality. Third, the emphasis on difference might hide real structural inequalities of society. Here a progressive paradox is identified, suggesting that there may be a trade-off between social welfare and multicultural policies: while the former stresses redistribution, they argue, the latter conforms to political correctness that may hamper effective distributive justice (Vasta, 2007).

Criticisms apart, international agencies have generally adopted the multicultural approach, justifying it as an effort to deepen democracy, rather than a threat to it. They have supported indigenous groups in their land and self-government demands; sub-state minorities in their claims for official recognition and enhanced regional autonomy, as well as immigrants’ demands for recognition. All such claims, despite ups and downs, have seen general progress in the past decades (Kymlicka and Bashir, 2008). Multicultural values and policies have expanded throughout the world, leading to the re-emergence of the value of difference, now converted into a global ideology. Even though critics have denounced such a spread as a new variant of American imperialism (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999), the recognition of difference has become a fact that all societies feel pressured to respond to, even when it is for different reasons and through different processes.

In this paper, we argue that, instead of focusing on the trade-offs between equality and difference, we can learn more from analyzing the multiple solutions that have emerged from these new dilemmas. Instead of looking for imported solutions, sociologists must take into consideration the distinctive dynamics through which the values of difference and equality have been constructed in each context. In other words, in order to reconcile difference and equality, one must take into account the variable roles they play in different contexts as elements of inclusion and exclusion.

In the remaining pages, we analyze the Brazilian case in order to explore how equality and difference have been negotiated in a country that has come from a model of racial democracy to a model with implementation of racial quotas. In particular we focus on the perceptions of Brazilians about three dilemmas relating to the re-emergence of difference as a democratic value: the relationship between difference and national unity; the relationship

between perceptions of difference and inequality, and the attitudes towards universal versus targeted policies. Before this, we provide a brief Brazilian historical background, with a particular focus on the construction of notions of ethno-racial difference.

### **The Brazilian Case: Durable Inequalities and Racial Democracy**

Brazilian nation-building, and its historical negotiation of equality, inequality and difference, is closely related to the history of slavery of people of African descent and the near elimination of the native population<sup>3</sup>. The introduction of forced labor in the colonies of the New World inaugurated a form of slavery unknown in previous history. While in antiquity military disputes were the mechanisms through which people were enslaved, and slavery reflected power competition, here economic motivation was the force behind the trading of human beings as labor force. In fact, slavery had already disappeared in Europe when, under conditions of labor scarcity and land abundance in the colonies, forced labor was adopted as an economic solution in different parts of the Americas (Reis and Reis, 1988). Despite significant variations in slave systems across colonial areas, slavery set the terms for race relations throughout the continent. In this context race became a cultural signifier of difference and the origin of durable inequalities (Tilly, 1998). Yet, the way difference and inequality were elaborated varied significantly inside the Americas as comparative research has traditionally pointed out (Freyre, 1956; Tannenbaum, 1946).

Variations in race relations between Brazil and the United States, the two largest slave systems in the continent, have long drawn particular research attention. Brazil was the largest importer of African slaves, the US coming second. It has been estimated that four million African slaves entered Brazil and one million the US (Curtin, 1969). The high figures for Brazil have been explained not only by the size and scope of its plantation system, but also by the significantly lower rate of reproduction of the slave population there. As it has been observed, unlike what took place in the US, slave families brought from Africa were not kept together in the Brazilian case. Family dismantling and extremely adverse labor conditions did not favor demographic reproduction (Curtin, 1969). As a consequence, the

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3. Although present in the founding myth of Brazilian racial democracy, today the indigenous in Brazil represent about one percent of the population and have a different status as citizens in the country —they usually live in reservations—, have special systems of education and political representation. Since 1990, the number of people who self-identify as Indigenous has increased in the country probably a product of the value of ethnic identification (previously the indigenous population was officially classified as brown, the same term used for those who come from the mixture of black and white families). Although this is an interesting topic, in this paper we focus on the Brazilian black population - which represents roughly half of the population and has been the focus of most debates about multicultural identification and affirmative action in Brazil.

supply of forced labor had to be constantly renewed. On the one hand, this helps to understand why legal attempts at stopping the African slave trade only succeeded under acute external pressure, i.e. when the British navy pointed cannons towards Rio de Janeiro in 1850 to prevent the entry of new slaves (Bethell, 1970; Conrad, 1972). On the other hand, the dismantling of slave families in Brazil (versus the strategy of slave breeding in the US) in conjunction with the predominance of male colonizers (who came without their families to explore the country) encouraged interracial mixing, which was sometimes consensual, but mostly forced.

In fact, what most sharply differentiated race relations in Brazil from those in the US was the way racial boundaries were monitored in each context. While in the US racial intermixing was socially banned, as indicated by the strict legislation forbidding it, in the Brazilian context, miscegenation was not only largely tolerated, but, in time, became positively valued as a signifier of indifference to race as a source of difference. This transition, from the evaluation of mixing as Brazil's main burden to Brazil's top quality, marks the construction of the racial democracy myth - which became the official ideology of nation building from 1930s onwards.

Nowadays, with a population who self identify as white (branco, 48%), brown (pardo, 43%) and black (preto, 8%), Brazil is considered a multiracial country (IBGE, 2010). The high percentage of browns has been historically considered as evidence of the absence of rigid color lines and taken as proof that Brazilians do not believe in racial differences, and that they would rather take for granted the equality of humankind. The multiple color shades that centuries of racial intermixing has produced in Brazil is reflected in the indicators that show no substantive differences can be identified between blacks and whites. According to such a perspective, racial inequality can be recognized —and it is undoubtedly evidenced by national statistics— but it is defined as distinct from racial difference. Racial inequality is attributed to peculiar historical conditions that provided different opportunities, which explain why poverty mostly afflicts blacks, but also a large number of whites. Yet, race is taken to mean simply the color of one's skin, and racism and prejudice are generally perceived as products of human ignorance rather than a structural characteristic of Brazilian society, as we will discuss later.

Variations of this thesis, generally referred to as racial democracy, have long been discussed, and not just in academic circles. Strong controversies have mobilized public opinion, with arguments pro and con. The thesis mobilized hot debates - especially since the implementation of racially-targeted affirmative action during the 1990s. For some, the myth of racial democracy has mystified race relations, preventing the mobilization of blacks against long established discriminatory practices. Most of the black movements in the second half of the twentieth century have defended such a perspective. In their view, the rise of race consciousness among people of African descent is a crucial ingredient to promote effective equality between blacks and whites (Hanchard, 1994). To others, on the contrary, the growing

awareness of racial identification endangers relations between blacks and whites in Brazil, creating dangerous divisions (Fry, 2007). They argue that postulating a black identity intrinsically promotes the relevance of race and therefore contributes to convert color into an essential difference. Between those two perspectives, the first one seems to have been the most successful: as argued by Paschel in her comparison between the black movements and the State in Brazil and Colombia (Forthcoming), Brazilian black activists seem to have been successful in making their demands heard by the State, even if it has never been able to mobilize a large number of black Brazilians.

A third posture is gaining momentum, and some believe it may succeed in dissolving the rigidity of the “either/ or” dichotomies in interpreting difference and inequality between blacks and whites in the country. A number of studies have shown that among the worse-off, blacks have lower chances of social mobility (Hasenbalg, 1979; Henriques, Barros, and Instituto de Pesquisa Economica Aplicada, 2000). Through the debate of inequality, racial differences have re-emerged as salient issues, and recognition has become a legitimate demand (Guimarães, 2007; Guimarães, 2006; Piovesan y Martins, 2006). Supporters of such a position may differ significantly as to the legitimacy of a black identity as well as with regard to support of racially-targeted social policies. Yet, as evidence to be shown in the following pages suggests, the distinctive positions *vis-à-vis* the issue does not necessarily put blacks and whites on opposite sides —most Brazilians do not seem to perceive the negotiation of equality and difference as dilemmatic —.

### How Brazilians deal with Equality, Inequality and Difference

In order to better understand how the macro cultural changes we described are perceived by Brazilians, in the next sections we rely on data from a number of publicly available survey studies and also on research projects we have been conducting in the past two decades<sup>4</sup>. Our aim is to analyze how Brazilians have been negotiating the dilemma of achieving greater equality and recognition of difference. First, we discuss perceptions about the national question in Brazil —or how Brazilians interpret the interface of national and ethno-racial identification —. In order to discuss this issue, we analyze trends in racial identification in Brazil and how they are related to national identification as well as to attachment and evaluation of Brazilian society. Second, we present data on attitudes towards inequality, equality and difference, with a particular focus on the perception about the trade-off between universal and racially-targeted policies. In particular,

4. Namely, we rely on the Datafolha National surveys on Race Relations (DFRS 1995 and 2008), the Perseu Abramo National Survey on Race Relations and Discrimination (FPAS, 2003), the 2001 International Social Survey Program – Brazil/ IUPERJ, the 2003 Datafolha Utopias Survey (DFU), the 1990 IUPERJ Strategic Elites Survey, the 1997 World Value Survey, the 2001 Latino Barometer. All but the last two (downloaded from their own websites) are available at the Consórcio de Informações Sociais website. For more information about the surveys please refer to their website [www.nadd.prp.usp.br/cis/index.aspx](http://www.nadd.prp.usp.br/cis/index.aspx).

we look at survey data on perceptions about inequality and racism, as well as support for racial quotas - the most common type of affirmative action implemented in Brazil nowadays. Because we argue that class differences are key to understanding how equality and difference are understood, we analyze how strategic elites evaluate the socioeconomic and ethno-racial dimensions of inequality, and how their perceptions compare to those of the broader population.

### **The National question: Racial Identification in Brazil**

The relationship between ethno-racial and national identification has been largely discussed as a political philosophy issue (see Appiah, 1992; Chatterjee 1993; Kymlicka 1995). The literature reveals that, until recently, there was widespread belief in the existence of a contradiction between ethno-racial identities—traditionally understood as local and parochial - and national or, more recently, supranational identities—defined, respectively, as modern and cosmopolitan. In this perspective, ethno-racial diversity was commonly defined as a threat to democracy and nation-building (Horowitz, 1985; Lijphart, 1977). The multicultural approach appeared in opposition to this view. It argued that ethno-racial identities could co-exist with strong national attachment, and that ethno-racial politics enhance rather than threaten, democracy. Furthermore, multiculturalists sustain that the progress of globalization might lead to strengthening of these identities (Kymlicka, 1995; Pieterse, 1996).

The issue has been largely approached from a macro historical perspective, in studies comparing nation-building in different countries (e.g. Bleich, 2005; Brubaker, 2001; Marx, 1998). Political scientists and social psychologists have also tried to measure how national attachment and ethno-racial identification are related through social attitudinal surveys, with mixed results (e.g. Citrin and Sears, 2009; Gibson, 2006; Sidanius, Feshbach, Levin, and Pratto, 1997). As we see it, one of the reasons behind these mixed results is that the interface of ethno-racial and national identifications varies significantly from context to context.

Based mostly on macro historical and cultural studies, the general assumption about Brazilian society postulates that racial identification is not salient, while national identity is strong across different racial groups. There has been, however, very little empirical research about the ways national and racial identities relate in the country. In fact, we could only find a handful of studies that empirically addressed this issue, most of them relying on international survey data. Their results show no contradiction between race and national identification.

One of the most discussed findings about race relations in Brazil is that, when asked open-ended questions about their race or color, Brazilians use a large number of terms to self-identify. Thus, for example, in 1976, a national survey found 136 categories, while another in 1998, lists 142. Such findings have commonly been used to support the idea that racial identification in Brazil is blurred, poorly-defined, and therefore weak. Yet, as



pointed out by several analysts, the majority of the population concentrates in a few traditional categories, mostly those that have been mentioned in the Census since the late nineteenth century: *branca* (white), *parda* (the formal census category for brown), and *preta* (the formal census category for black). The informal category of *morena* (literally brunette or tanned) is also very common, and includes people of all colors. Together these categories comprise about 90 percent of the total, indicating a high degree of consistency in racial identification over time and in different regions.

However, evidence also points to a few significant changes. In analyzing survey results over time it is possible to see a growing identification as negro in Brazil, and this growth is stronger among *pretos* and *pardos* with higher education (Datafolha, 2008; Sansone, 2003; Turra, Venturi, and Datafolha, 1995). A survey conducted in 1995 and replicated in 2008 found that negro identification more than doubled, going from 2,6% to 7% of the total population during that period. Among *pretos* and *pardos* with higher education, the group in which this identification had the highest increase, the number went from 12,6% to 25% (Datafolha, 2008; Turra, Venturi, and Datafolha, 1995). Other studies have shown that when race is asked about open-endedly, the category negro appears more often than the historical Census category *preto* in all regions of the country. These changes confirm that the Brazilian racial order is changing and previously meaningless ethno-racial identities may acquire new politicized contents that may play a role in nation and state-building.

Yet, international and publicly available surveys like the World Value Survey and the Latinobarometer that have tried to capture the interface of race and nation in Brazil do not identify tensions between national and racial identities. Instead, they point to the fact that Brazilians seem to interpret racial and national identification as non-dilemmatic. Thus, for example, in 1997, the World Value Survey asked Brazilians if they would define themselves mostly according to national or racial identification. Almost half of the respondents (46,9%) mentioned they were first of all Brazilian, and only in second place did they bear a racial or ethnic identity. The percentages of those who chose dual-identities over national identity were slightly higher for blacks (48%) than for whites (43,4%), yet differences were not substantial. Similarly, the 2001 Latinobarometer asked if individuals felt closer to their ethno-racial or national identities. Again, 47,8% of Brazilians chose their national identity, while the remainder chose racial identities. Qualitative data confirms that for most people the choice of racial versus national identifications is meaningless - which would explain the lack of patterns across racial groups (Moraes Silva, 2013).

We also observe that people from all Census racial groups (black, brown, yellow and Indian) tend to agree that Brazil is an example of racial and cultural mixing to be followed by different countries. In addition, the same survey shows that Brazilians from all races and classes are similarly proud of Brazilian achievements in different areas (culture, music, democracy, etc). As suggested in Table 1, Brazilians across different races evaluate the

country similarly and are equally proud of its achievements, in general and with regard to very specific aspects, including race relations.

**Table 1.** Brazil as an example of racial mixing  
 Answer to the question - Would you agree that Brazil is an example of racial mixing to be followed by other countries? - by Racial Census categories (%)

	White (Branca)	Black (Preta)	Brown (Parda)	Total*
Yes	75.4	74.8	75.7	75.6
No	17.8	17.4	18.3	18.0
Do not know	6.8	7.7	6.0	6.4
Total	100 (1,198)	100 (310)	100 (617)	100 (2,823)

Source: DFUS 2003. Our tabulations.

\*Includes indigenous, yellow and other racial identities

In short, unlike North American and South African results, among others, these findings show that people across all racial groups in Brazil display no difference in their attachment to the nation. Brazilians seem to value both their racial and national identifications, but generally choose to emphasize both when given the chance. These results have been confirmed by in-depth interviews, which show that, even among those respondents most attached to their black (negro) identity, national identification was not seen as contradictory to their racial identification. In fact, if anything, they felt more closely tied to the country and its history (Moraes Silva, 2013). In addition, the affirmation of their negritude was commonly associated to the idea of racial mixing - it rarely involved the exclusion of whites from their personal networks or national ideals (Moraes Silva and Reis, 2012). In other words, the strengthening of racial identification in Brazil does not seem to pose a threat to national unity, even when it comes accompanied by racially-targeted social policies, as we discuss next.

The celebration of Brazilian race-relations, however, co-exists with a widespread awareness of racial prejudice and inequality in the country. This is an inconsistency that lies at the core of Brazilian race dynamics and may provide clues to understanding its recent transformation.

**Perceptions of Equality, Difference, and Inequality**

National Surveys show that over 90% of Brazilians perceive income inequality as being too high in the country (Scalon, 2004). Such a perception is shared across race and class - and similar results have been found in surveys with elites (Reis, 2004). Similarly, about 90% of Brazilians agree that there is racial prejudice in the country, a perception equally shared across race and class (Datafolha, 2008), a perception shared with elite

respondents (89,4% acknowledged that there is racial prejudice in the country). Yet, when asked to rank the most important problems of the country, inequality and poverty commonly appear as important issues, but not race and racism. In the 2003 survey, unemployment, health, and inequality were ranked the most important problems by respondents of all socioeconomic groups. Likewise, in the 1990 elite survey, respondents listed lack of education first (44,5%), and poverty and inequality second (40,3%) when ranking the two major impediments to democracy. In both surveys, race and racism did not appear on the priority list. In the remainder of this section we discuss possible explanations for this discrepancy. We believe that the recent debate about affirmative action and racial quotas provides possible answers.

During the 1990s, a timid debate about the implementation of racial quotas emerged in Brazil - a result of the perception that despite oscillation in the general pattern of socioeconomic inequality in the country, racial inequality has remained stable (Telles, 2004). But it is since 2003 - partly as a result of the repercussion of the UN Durban Conference against Racism and Discrimination - that affirmative action policies have started to be implemented throughout the country (Htun, 2004). The most well-known are racial quotas in the public universities throughout Brazil. At present, most of these institutions in Brazil (65 of 94 state and federal universities), including some of the most prestigious and selective ones, have implemented affirmative action in their admissions. Fifty-one of them have introduced quotas, with 37 of them at least partly targeted at Afro-Brazilians (negro, pretos and pardos).

In 1994, before the widespread implementation of affirmative action, elites were asked in the survey if they agreed to giving more opportunities to blacks and browns via racial quotas. Nearly all elite respondents (90,1%) rejected racial quotas. Such a rejection is partly related to the fact that most respondents also said that racial inequalities were a result of lack of education (41,8%) and a historical inheritance (26,6%). Yet, even the majority of those who believed discrimination was the source of racial inequality (33% of the total sample) rejected racial quotas.

In contrast to elite attitudes, national survey results from 2008 (Data-folha) show that a small majority of Brazilians support affirmative action policies in its most radical form - racial quotas. In addition, this support grew slightly between 1995 and 2008 - the period in which the debate about racial quotas in public universities gained public attention. In 2008, respondents were asked if they were for or against a 20% quota in universities: 51% of the respondents agreed with the quota. In addition, 62% of respondents partly agreed or agreed completely that "quotas for negros are important to broaden access to universities to the whole population".

There are no significant differences in support for such a quota system across racial groups, even if negros (defined here as the sum of those who identify as pretos and pardos) tend to support it slightly more often than whites. It is only when we separate these groups by education that a clear

divide emerges, indicating that it is higher education, not race, which makes a difference, as shown in table 2 below. This is one of the particularities of the Brazilian case, when compared to South Africa or the United States: low-income whites are for affirmative action while highly educated blacks are against it.

**Table 2:** Attitudes towards racial quotas by racial groups (Brazil)  
Are you in favor or against quotas, i.e. that places are reserved for negros and afro-descendents in universities? (% in favor)

	Below high school	High School	Higher Education
Whites	53	45	27
Browns (Pardos)	53	53	38
Blacks (Pretos)	61	52	31

Source: DFRS, 2008

Support for race-based policies, however, has to be put in the context of support for other social policies. In 2003 (Fundação Perseu Abramo national survey), respondents were also asked to choose the best option to reduce the inequality between negros and whites in access to university. They were given four options. Small majorities across racial groups believed improving basic education was the best way (53%), followed by opening more places in colleges (24%), offering free preparatory courses for negro students (13%), while only a small minority believed the best policy was to reserve places for negros (7%). When asked what type of quota should be created, the majority believed that they should equally be reserved for students coming from state high schools (regarded as lower quality when compared to private schools) regardless of race or color (59%), followed by opposition to any type of quota (22%), and only then reservation for negro students (14%). In short, when given the option, most Brazilians prefer universal policies (improve the education system) to targeted social policies. And when given the option between socioeconomic and racial targeting, they prefer the socioeconomic.

These results indicate that racial inequalities are perceived as intrinsically linked to socioeconomic inequality. The support for racial quotas in this context appears as support for socioeconomic inclusion policies —racially targeted and universal policies do not appear here as contradictory—, but as complementary. Yet, Brazilians do seem to prefer universal policies that target socioeconomic inequalities more broadly—and even in their support for racial quotas—, equality of conditions still seems to be the main goal. The recognition of difference, therefore, appears to be closely related to the recognition of inequality - it emerges from the awareness of persistent racial inequalities.

Yet, difference and inequality may occupy distinct spheres of exclusion. The same 2003 survey asked people if governments should intervene to reduce racism and discrimination, or if this was a problem the people should solve themselves with no government interference. Overall, more people believed that racism is a problem of the people (49% vs. 36% who believe it is a government obligation to intervene). Responses were not significantly correlated to race and education, although blacks in general and respondents with higher education (black and white) tended to support government intervention more often —the latter in partial contradiction of their rejection of affirmative action policies—. These results are particularly puzzling due to the overall belief that social policies to address inequalities are a government responsibility, as discussed by Elisa Reis (2004). They might indicate that Brazilians perceive racial inequalities as intrinsically linked to socioeconomic inequalities, but racial prejudice and racism are defined as moral problems to be solved by education and socialization, rather than through redistributive policies (Moraes Silva, 2012).

In short, Brazilians support for affirmative action is conditional —small majorities support racial quotas— with the exception of blacks and whites with higher education who reject it. Large majorities across educational and racial groups, however, prefer color-blind, fully universal criteria. These ambiguities seem to indicate that Brazilians do not understand racially targeted and universal policies as mutually exclusive - even if they suggest a hierarchy of priorities between the two.

### **Concluding Remarks: a New Possibility of Society Building?**

In the previous pages, we insisted on the idea that processes of state and nation building combine, in various ways, the idea of equality, difference and inequality. It is true that the original European experience in building nation-states was converted into a model emulated elsewhere. Yet, the variable historical circumstances, as well as the political choices made by concrete actors, allowed for significant variations. Therefore, it is only natural that the global re-emergence of difference is also experienced differently across different countries and regions.

We identified three general societal dilemmas concerning the re-emergence of difference as a key dimension. First, difference might undermine the basis of national solidarity.

Second, difference may be a threat to universalism, and therefore to equality itself.

Third, the emphasis on difference might hide real structural inequalities of society.

Taking the ethno-racial dimension to explore the Brazilian case, we drew attention to its distinct solutions for these dilemmas.

Looking at how Brazilians look at difference and inequality, we observed that there are indications that identity differences have been acquiring salience in recent decades, suggesting that actors subjectively value their distinctiveness within the nation, though not necessarily experiencing

nationhood and color as “either or” choices. Despite the growing importance of difference —illustrated by the strengthening of the negro identity— the interface of racial and national identifications is not perceived as dilemmatic.

In addition, while support for race-targeted affirmative action is significant, there is clear evidence that most Brazilians still prefer universal policies of inclusion. Highly educated groups, in particular, clearly voice this preference as well as their criticism to targeted policies. Nevertheless, most Brazilians do not seem to perceive these two policy options as contradictory. Instead, both alternatives seem to be perceived as valuable strategies of social inclusion.

Finally, we suggest that the re-emergence of difference as a salient political dimension in Brazil derives from the growing awareness of inequality. Rather than hiding inequalities, recognition of difference is embedded in the awareness of acute inequality.

To sum up our findings, the relationships between difference and equality are clearly shaped by historical circumstances. As suggested by Fraser (2000), no ready-made recipes are available. Policy prescriptions to balance equality and recognition depend on salient dilemmas in each context. If, through variable paths, the affirmation of equality was an essential condition for nation-state formations, the negotiation of equality and difference might play a similar role in the contemporary processes of society building.

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